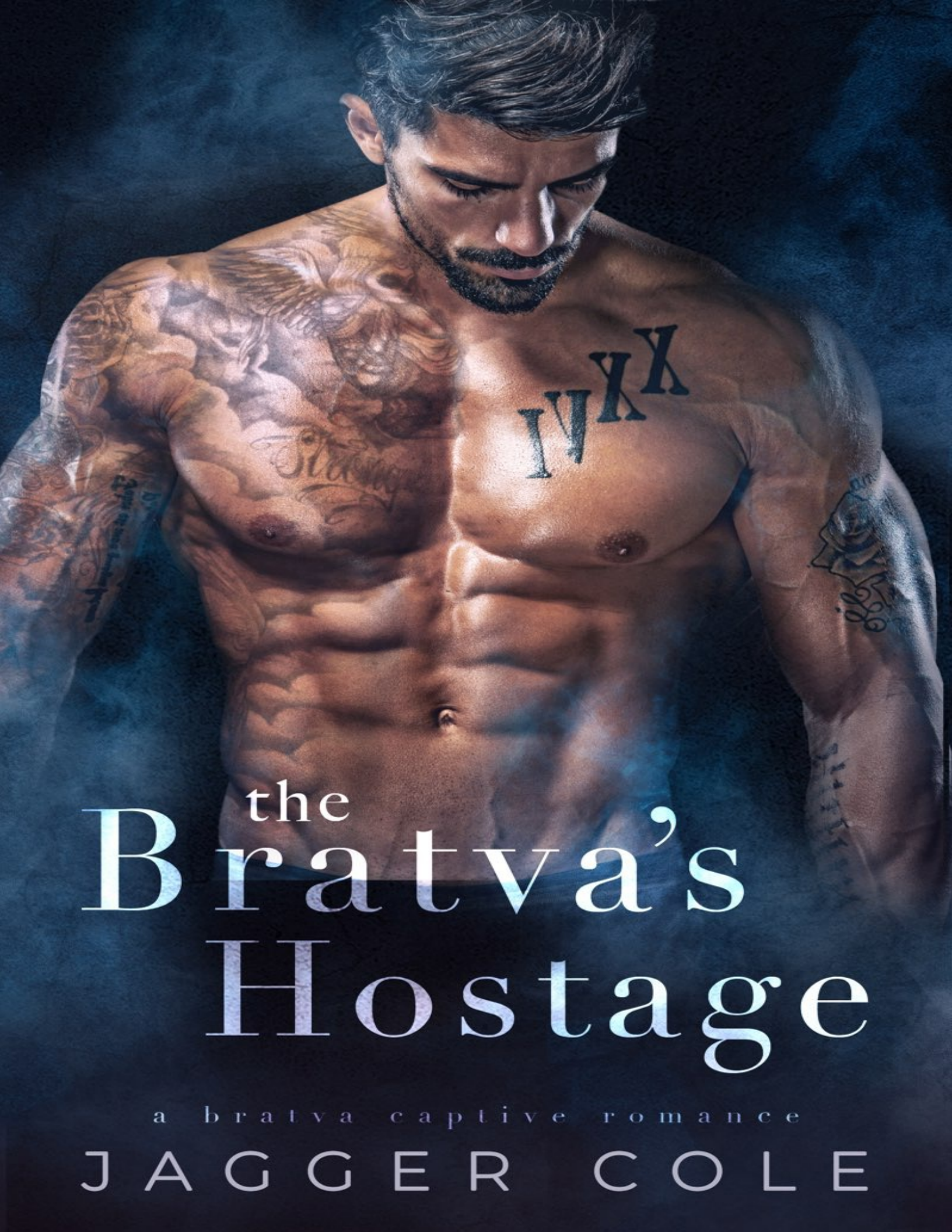
the
Bratva's
Hostage
a bratva captive romance
JAGGER COLE

THE BRATVA'S HOSTAGE

A BRATVA'S CLAIM PREQUEL

JAGGER COLE

The Bratva's Hostage
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THE BRATVA'S HOSTAGE

Taking her was only the beginning…

A hit gone wrong. My partner, the future King of the Kashenko Bratva, bleeding out. There's only one choice left for me:

Kidnap the daughter of the rival mob boss, and take her as my hostage.

Now, she's my temptingly innocent, beautifully forbidden bargaining chip.

Talia is a pretty little bird, trapped all her life in a gilded cage. Too good for me. Too young for me, too. A softness I've never touched. A sweetness I've never tasted.

We're trapped together, and time is running out.

But the solution might be just as forbidden as she is…

*This extra-steamy novella is a *standalone* prequel to the Bratva's Claim series. Absolutely no cheating, no cliffhanger, and a happy ever after.*

A SPECIAL PRESENT

The Jagger Cole fans-only newsletter is the first place to hear about new releases, giveaways, and more! Sign up today to grab a free copy of Mr Big - an extra hot billionaire romance not available anywhere else!

1

ROMAN

THE SHEET-GLASS WINDOW behind us explodes in a shower of shards. A hail of bullets ding and bang off the construction equipment we're ducked behind and kick up dirt by my feet. I hiss, gritting my teeth as my tattooed fingers curl tightly around the gun in my hand.

Next to me, Viktor groans as he slides a fresh mag into his gun. But when I glance at him, my eyes narrow in concern. He's prepping for another firefight, but he's in bad shape. He's trying to hide it from me, or maybe that's just Viktor: always muscling through the pain to fight on.

But he's not looking good. He's pale, and the blood soaking the front of his shirt from the shot to the gut is dripping all over the place.

I turn to poke my head around the side of earth-mover, to see how close Gio Marchetti and his goons are. But I barely get my nose around the corner before I wince and pull back. Bullets pepper the metal, exploding shards of rust and sparks past my face.

We're trapped.

Shit has gone *way* wrong.

This was supposed to be an easy kill. Gio Marchetti, head of the Marchetti Family, has been waging a secret war on the Kashenko Bratva: sabotaging our shipments, picking off our guys when they can, and generally being a thorn in the side of a rising empire.

But that was supposed to stop tonight. That's why Viktor and I, both top *avtoritet* in the Kashenko organization, are here. We're at the base of the new sky-rise luxury building Gio's the principal investor in. The bottom thirty-nine floors are still under major construction—most without windows, even. But the very top was finished months ago, at Gio's request.

That's his fortress penthouse—a top of the line security, ultra-secure Fort Knox at the top of his new building. But the intel from one of our spies told us he was short security tonight for his nightly drop off. And since there's only one working elevator in the gutted, unfinished lobby of the building, it's an

easy choke point.

Until we realized the intel was wrong. Very wrong. In fact, I'm relatively sure we just got set up, hard.

Gio wasn't "light" on security. He had four times the usual crew when Vik and I popped up to take him out. Viktor caught one in the side of the stomach, and now we're pinned behind this earth-mover, caught between it and the elevator to the penthouse which only opens with the right code.

Gio and about forty of his guys are between us and getting the hell out of here. In short, we're *fucked*.

I whip my head to the side and spot a pile of support beams across the construction site. It's maybe fifteen feet away. It's not ideal, but it's a start. It's more cover than the fucking truck we're behind, that's for sure.

I turn back to Viktor, but he's already nodding, seeing where I've been looking.

"Think you can make it?"

His eyes narrow. "Yeah."

But when he goes to stand, he hisses, and his feet give out. Fresh blood soaks through his shirt and the hand he's got clamped to it.

Shit.

"I'm gonna carry you."

"Fuck off, just get there yourself. I'll be fine right—*damnit*, Roman!"

I ignore his bullshit and grab him. I know it probably hurts like a motherfucker, but I toss him over my shoulder and turn. I bolt from behind the truck. But instantly, I know this is a shitty idea. Bullets wiz past us, kicking up dust and more sparks as they rattle off iron bars.

Fuck it.

With a heave of my shoulders, I hurl Viktor across the rest of the divide, until he's behind the stack of beams. He groans in pain as I whirl to dive back behind the truck. But suddenly I hiss at the burn across my back.

Fuck me, I think I just caught some lead.

Back behind the truck, I glance across the divide at my friend. He's looking even worse. I grit my teeth, my mind hammering out the outcomes as I figure out the next move.

And then suddenly, the elevator behind me dings as the doors slide open.

"Dad? What's going—*oh my God…*"

I whirl just as the doors open, and suddenly, I'm face to face with an angel. She's beautiful. And not just pretty, I mean the single most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on. Blonde, big blue eyes, soft pink lips open in a shocked O-shape.

It stops me cold, like putting the world on pause or slow motion. Bullets wiz past me like we're underwater. I can't get to Vik. There's no other way out. But something she said… *"dad."*

She's staring at me standing in front of her looking I'm sure deranged with a gun in my hand. But when she looks past me, I follow her faze.

"*Dad*?" she chokes.

She's staring at Gio. And suddenly, it clicks into place.

Holy fuck, she's Gio's *daughter*.

And she's standing in the elevator that only opens with a key code: my only escape right now.

I turn to look at Vik. But he's gritting his teeth and nodding.

"*Go!*" He roars at me.

I start to shake my head when he levels his gun at me.

"Get your ass in there, Roman!" he snarls. "Now!"

Bullets spray the wall next to me, making me hiss and making the girl scream in terror. But there's no more time for hashing this out or planning. It's time to move.

I rush her hard, grabbing her, whirling, and bringing the gun up to her head. The second I do that, I hate myself. More than any of the many, many bad things I've done in my life. For some reason, putting the possibility of harm to this angel's head makes me sick.

But just then, ten or so of Gio's men rush around the side of the truck I was just behind. They all raise their guns, but they freeze when they realize I've got her.

My hostage.

My pulse thunders in my ear as I drag her back into the elevator. Gio comes bolting around the truck too. His eyes bulge as he sees who I have.

"You *motherfucker*!!" he screeches. "Let her—!"

“He stays alive!” I roar, nodding my chin towards Viktor.

I don’t have to finish the sentence or the threat. They know what I mean.

I kick a foot out and slam the door-close button. I glare at Gio, and slowly bring my gaze to Vik as the doors close. They shut with a click, and then it’s just the reflection of her in my arms.

I tense. She smells so fucking good. She so soft and warm. She’s so… good, and innocent, and it’s breaking me.

“*Please*…” she sobs. “Please don’t hurt—”

“What’s your name, *solnyshka*,” I murmur as I reach over and punch the button for the penthouse.

What’s your name, *sunshine*.

She trembles.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I say quietly. But my arm stays tight wrapped around her.

“What’s your name.”

“*Talia*,” she quivers. “Please! Please don’t hurt—”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Talia,” I growl. I turn her, and before I know what I’m doing, I’m dropping to a knee in front of her, pushing the gun into the waist of my jeans, and taking her hands in mine. The elevator rises as I look up into her big blue eyes.

“I’m never going to hurt you.”

2

TALIA

I DRUM my fingers across the counter of the kitchen island. It's quiet in the huge, glamorous apartment. And I'm alone, which is always heaven. But at the same time, I can't shake the cloud hanging heavy and dark over me.

He's really doing it.

I've wondered if my strict, controlling, old-school father would ever get to this point. I've always hoped I was wrong or tried to tell myself this isn't the Middle Ages—no one does forced arranged marriages to seal business deals anymore.

No one except my father, Gio Marchetti, that is.

I'm used to the control, and the bars. This penthouse above the unfinished building might be new. But I've spent my whole life in towers just like it—in gilded cages, with hardly any contact with the outside world. Barely any friends, and even those are the ones my dad approved of. And as for boys?

Hah.

Now that I'm eighteen, it's not even a joke anymore. It's just a bitter punchline.

I pull up the Google search again on my phone. My body stiffens as I start to read up again on the man I'll be marrying in a week—the person I don't even know who I'll be tied to for the rest of my life.

His name is Chris Amato, the son of a crooked, mob-connected shipping baron named Alfredo Amato. And by all accounts, both father and son are *monsters*. Chris is all over the news, and none of it's good. His antics waving guns around at nightclubs. The numerous women with black eyes and horrible stories of abuse at his hands—all whom disappear with big payouts and no charges.

My eyes land on the smirking picture of the red-faced Chris, cigar in his teeth and beer in his hand, posing with a bunch of strippers for an Instagram shot.

Yeah, my future husband, right here.

Well, or not. Things were moving right along to arranged-marriage-land until earlier today. Apparently, my dad says Alfredo is backing out or having second thoughts about the deal. Of course, dad also blamed *me* for that, for whatever reason.

I groan and sink my forehead to the counter. I honestly can't even care about any of this anymore. It's exhausting when no part of your life or your fate is your own to control.

With a sigh, I reach for my phone. I text my friend Fiona, who might be the one person on earth who at least sort of gets how regimented my life is. Her dad is a politician, not a mob boss. But he also keeps her locked up tight, controlling a lot of her life. We know each other because we share the same tutor, and we've lamented on the life of a bird in a cage to each other many times.

But even Fiona doesn't have it this bad. Her dad might be tough, but he's not the monster I know my father is. I know about his business. But worse, I know about his *new* business interests—the one that involves trafficking young women.

I blanche. Even thinking about the phone call of his confirming it that I walked in on a few weeks ago makes me sick.

So, no. Fiona might understand the life I lead. But she doesn't have the darkness in hers that I have in mine. And she's not being married off to some psychopath who's watched *Goodfellas* one too many times.

It's official. My dad just told me. Prepare to be friends with Mrs. Chris Amato. Shoot me.

But there's no response. I stare at the message waiting for at least the "read" notification, but nothing.

I sigh and slump down on the barstool. But then, I hear the sounds of banging outside, down below. I frown. It's a little late for them to be doing construction, isn't it?

Sliding off the stool, I walk across the huge living room area to the wall of fourteen-foot windows overlooking Chicago. I press my face to the glass and look down. I can barely make it out, but I see the flashes and sparks of what must be welding. The banging sound comes again, like rapid popping sounds. I groan. Great. Construction at ten at night.

But then, I frown.

No. You know what? *No*. Today, I've hit my breaking point. I'm not going to sit up here trying to block out the banging sound and the welding. I'm not my dad, but I am his daughter. And no one working on this building *doesn't* know what the Marchetti name means in this city.

I stride to the elevator and punch the button. The doors slide open, I step in, and hammer in the ground floor. It's been so weird living in a building that isn't even remotely finished. I mean the lobby

literally has a gravel floor and no walls yet. But it's what my dad wanted, so here we are.

The elevator drops down. The banging sound is deafeningly loud now. I frown. God, it almost sounds like gunfire. I take a breath and prepare to go find the foreman to demand this crap stops for the night.

The doors open.

"Dad? What's going—"

My body goes rigid.

Oh my God.

Men are roaring and screaming in pain. The thunderous sound of gunfire assaults my ears. I gasp as bullets wiz past me, slamming into the wall behind me as I choke on a scream.

And then, *he* whirls. The huge, hulking, beast of a man whirls on me, and my heart skips. He's gorgeous—dark hair, piercing, intense blue eyes, bulging shoulder muscles, and tattoo ink swirling across his forearms and neck from under his shirt.

He's older, too. Probably late thirties or early forties, with the slightest silver to the sides of his short hair.

He's gorgeous, but also absolutely terrifying. He turns to me and his piercing eyes lock onto me. For a second, my eyes pull from him, past him, where I suddenly see my dad standing with a group of his men.

"*Dad*?"

The man in front of me tenses. His jaw grits as his eyes seem to burn fiercely at me. And then suddenly, he charges.

I scream, but his huge hands grab me, spin me, yank my back hard against his huge, bulging body. It's like his muscles have muscles. He's just… *solid*. He's rock-hard, all over.

And it shouldn't thrill me like this.

His huge arm circles my neck, and I gasp. The metal of a gun barrel presses to my head, and I go cold and stiff.

"*Please…*" I whisper in a choke.

My father and his men rush around the side of a construction vehicle and stop when they see me held captive.

“You *motherfucker*!!” My dad yells. “Let her—!”

“He stays alive!” The huge man holding me roars. I turn and see another man I don’t know bleeding on the ground, in pain.

The man holding me doesn’t finish the thought. But the look on my father’s face says he gets it.

I want to scream, but I’m so scared I can barely breathe. The big man pulls me back into the elevator. His hand kicks out and hits the close door button. The panic surges inside of me as the doors slide shut. And then, we’re alone.

I stare at the refection in the mirrored door: me in the arms of this absolute monster of a man. He’s like almost two feet taller than my five-foot-three. And all muscles; all bulging shoulders and arms, big chest, and powerful looking hands.

“Please…” I choke in terror. “Please don’t hurt—”

“What’s your name, *solnyshka*,” he murmurs. He reaches over and pushes the button up to my dad’s penthouse.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says quietly when I can’t respond. His arms stay wrapped tight around me. But the gun is dropped away.

“What’s your name?”

“*Talia*,” I gasp. “Please! Please don’t hurt—”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Talia,” the man grunts. He turns and slowly gets to his knee in front of me. He tucks the gun behind him and looks into my eyes. He takes my hands, in a strangely touching and comforting way.

His blue eyes look up into mine, piercing right into me as he holds my hands firmly but gently.

“I’m never going to hurt you.”

It’s almost tender. No, it *is* tender, which is confusing. So is the way he looks at me with a protective glint in his eyes. Like he’s not my kidnapper, but my savior.

Like he’s the knight I’ve been waiting for, even if he rides under a black banner.

“Who are you?” I whisper as the elevator rises.

He looks away. “This will all be over soon, I promise.”

The doors to the penthouse open. He pulls me in after him, but gently.

“You have the code, I assume?”

I bite my lip. “What code?”

“Please don’t play dumb with me, *solnyshka*,” he growls quietly.

I swallow. Then I nod. “Yeah, I have it.”

“I need you to lock this place down.”

I shiver. I know what that means. This penthouse is a *fortress*. An almost literal fortress. With the business my father does and the enemies he’s made, it’s like the whole place is a panic room. Bullet proof and blast proof windows, steel doors, a self-contained electrical and air system. There’s even massive bars, like a cage, that slide over the open-air terrace. And my captor wants me to lock us in here.

Alone. Just him and I, in an impenetrable tower.

The shiver in my spine though is excitement, not fear. Or, it’s both, but that should concern me a lot more than it does…

“Do it.”

I swallow as I turn to the keypad on the wall. I punch in the code, and then tremble as the mechanical locks slide into place. It’s the sound of the doors sealing, the windows hardening, the bars over the outdoor terrace sliding up.

With a final click, and a hiss, it’s done.

We’re locked in here, together.

“It’s Roman.”

I shiver as I turn, chewing on my lip.

“You asked me who I was.”

He moves closer to me. I gasp when his hand reaches for me, but even if it’s so huge, like he could cover my whole face with it, he’s gentle. He cups my face, tilting my eyes up to his as my pulse races.

“My name is Roman, Talia.”

3

ROMAN

THIS IS A MISTAKE. Not coming here, not trusting the intel that the security would be light. I mean locking myself in an impenetrable fortress with *her*.

She… does something to me. She makes a war in me of lust versus duty. I've spent my life serving the Kashenko Bratva, from when I was a boy to the forty-year-old man I am now

The ink, scars, and demons on my skin and in my heart will attest to that.

Never once have I strayed from duty or backed down from a fight that needed fighting. But she makes me want to stray from that hard walk. A lot.

The soft skin, the gorgeous, blue eyes. That silky blonde hair that simultaneously makes me want to grip it in a fist and tug hard, and also to wash it gently with my hands.

She trembles as I sit her in a chair by the window. The tasseled pull-ties from some of the elegant window treatments rip under my yank, and I use those to start to tie her wrists to the armrests.

I don't *want* to tie her up—well, not in this context. But I have to. Lust versus duty rages in my head.

"Please, don't—"

"I already told you, Talia…"

Fuck, her name from my lips. I imagine myself growling it as she moans for me. I replay it as a groan as I feel her slide down every inch my thick—

I grunt and clear my head. I need to get my head in the game, because this whole situation is *fucked*. Gio is still alive. I'm trapped with his fucking daughter as my hostage. But he's got Viktor—my friend, my fellow captain, but more importantly and unknown to anyone but a few in the upper command of the Kashenko Bratva, most likely our next king.

The Kashenko family is based in Moscow. But the leadership is aging. Their hold over there is slipping. Currently, the real power and might of the family lies here in Chicago, under the guidance of Ivan Kashenko, who leads things in Chicago.

But he wants out. He's older, his wife is having some health problems, and he's ready to pass on the crown. Word has it, that crown will go to Viktor. He might not be Kashenko by blood, but Viktor Komarov has bled for this organization. On top of that, he has the charisma and the will to lead. I've also bled for this family, but I don't have those other things. I have no desire to lead. I'm no Caesar, as he is.

But now our future king is bleeding out and in the enemy's hands. While I'm locked up here. And the one bargaining chip I have, I'm not so sure I'd be able to let go of.

"Please," she whispers, shaking. "Please don't hurt—"

"I told you, Talia," I growl again. My eyes level with her, trying my best to look, well, not like me. Not like the beast of a man who's probably terrifying her.

"I'm not going to hurt you. But unfortunately, you're in the middle of…" I frown. Who knows what a man like Gio has even told his daughter—

"The middle of my father's mafia mess, you mean," she says thinly,

I arch a brow. I guess that would mean she does know.

"I'm sorry," I growl. "For what that is worth."

She nods and looks down, looking quiet and withdrawn. It makes me scowl to see the light go out in those eyes. And it makes me hate Gio even more for being the cause of it.

It makes me hate myself for the same reason.

I gently cup her cheek and raise her eyes to mine.

"This will be okay, I promise. Your father has my friend—"

"You were here to kill him, weren't you?"

My jaw clenches.

"My dad, I mean."

I look away.

"You don't have to say it out loud, I know it's true."

“It’s… complicated,” I grunt.

“No, it isn’t.” Her mouth thins. “He’s a bad man who does bad things.”

“So am I,” I say quietly.

“Then how come you don’t seem bad?”

I frown. “I’ve kidnaped you at gunpoint, made you a hostage, brought you to a locked penthouse, and tied you to a chair.”

She swallows.

“I… never mind,” she says quickly.

“What?”

“It’s dumb.”

My mouth curls. “I doubt that.”

She blushes and chews on her lip.

“I get a feel for people when I’m around them. Like… not something stupid like auras or whatever. Just, a feeling.”

“And what do you feel about me,” I murmur thickly, my pulse thudding.

“That you’re not a bad man.”

She’s wrong. I’m a demon.

I stiffen as I get to my feet and turn away, my jaw clenched.

“I’d recalibrate your feelings meter, princess. Because you’re wrong about me.”

“You’re—”

“I’m a nightmare of a man,” I snarl, glancing back at her.

I need her to know that. I need her to be scared of me. Or else, there’s no way I’ll be able to keep myself from her.

“The quicker you learn that, the safer you’ll be until this is all over.”

I ignore the heart wrenching beauty in her face. I tear myself away from the captivating way she looks at me and opens her mouth like there’s more she wants to say. Instead, I turn and I stalk down the hall

to check the perimeters.

And to get myself away from her, before I break.

4

ROMAN

I STALK THROUGH THE PENTHOUSE, my thoughts swirling. None of this is how this was supposed to go down. Not the bungled hit. Not Viktor being shot. And not taking Gio's daughter—I groan. Fuck me, I didn't even know the motherfucker *had* a daughter.

Great fucking intel.

I push open a door and find myself in what must be Gio's office. I move to the window and glance down. I can see movement down below, but there's no way to tell what's going on.

I grunt as I drop my forehead to the glass. I have to keep her out of my mind. I have to let this instant obsession go. The goal here is to get out of here alive. But more important, the goal is to get *Viktor* out alive. He's the future. He'll be the king at the throne of the Kashenko Bratva, and soon.

That's what this mission is now. It's not about the temptation sitting in the other room, tied to a chair.

My prisoner. My hostage. My weakness, apparently.

I shake my head. What am I thinking? She's what, eighteen? Nineteen, maybe? I'm forty. I'm more than twice her age, and a killer for the Bratva. Scarred, inside and out. I'm rough to her smooth innocence; a beast to her beauty.

I roll my eyes at myself. I have to let this go. I might be unable to get her out of my head or stop thinking of how her lips would taste. But she sees me as the monster I know I am. The huge, hulking Goliath who just took her at gunpoint and tied her to a fucking chair.

I turn away from the window. But my eyes land on the laptop sitting on Gio's desk. It's closed, but there's a pen sticking out from where screen is folded to the keyboard, keeping it from closing entirely.

When I open it, I stiffen.

The pen has stopped the laptop from going to sleep and locking. When I open it, it's just open, no password screen or anything.

I smile thinly. Well, this is interesting.

I sit in his chair and bring up the first window. It's an email correspondence of some kind. I'm about to skip it and hunt for something juicier the Keshenko family could use. But then, I realize what I'm reading.

My jaw tightens as a rage surges in me. It's about *Talia*.

The chain of emails is a correspondence between Gio and Alfredo Amato, a Chicago-based mafia wannabe. But it's the about Alfredo's son, Chris…

I snarl when I read what's happening.

"*Motherfucker*," I hiss into the darkness of the office.

Gio is *marrying* Talia to Fredo's shithead son, Chris, for a price. For a business agreement. His own goddamn daughter.

I'm so angry I almost throw the laptop, or slam it shut. But I stop myself, keeping it open so it doesn't lock.

I read more. Apparently, there's been a hiccup in the plan; Alfredo having second thoughts about the deal or something. But still… pure rage and hatred surge inside of me. I see storm clouds as I thunder back to the living area.

My eyes fall on her, and my heart twists. I made her a prisoner, and I'd bet that she's been one her whole life. She trembles when she sees how intense I am as I move towards her. I reach for her, and she gasps. But I grab the ties binding her, yank them undone, and rip them away from her.

"No," I growl, shaking my head. "You've been captive longer than I can imagine, haven't you?"

With a father like Gio? Willing to sell his only kid into marriage for a business arrangement? I know I'm right.

Talia bites lip and looks down.

"You father…" I shake my head. "He was really going make you marry?"

"Yes," she whispers.

She starts to sniff back tears. The need to comfort her is almost overwhelming.

“Fuck, Talia…”

I move closer to her, pulling her into me as I cup her cheek. She looks up at me with so much innocence and so much sadness.

I’m no knight in shining armor. I’m not a hero, by a goddamn bloody mile. But I’ve never been looked at like this by someone like her, looking so much like the damsel in distress.

Something shatters in me; breaks, snaps, rewires.

I don’t think. I can’t, not with her so close to me like this. So I don’t, and I just act instead. My hand cups her cheek, and I start to lean down.

She doesn’t turn. She doesn’t pale or stiffen. She moves into me. Her hand falls to my chest, gripping my shirt.

I growl as I lean down, and suddenly, my lips crush to hers, and I’m kissing her deeply.

She whimpers, and it’s the most alluring, beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. In a world and a life of pain and darkness, I may have just found the light.

5

TALIA

His lips sear to mine, and everything explodes. It's like fireworks. It's the world shifting on its axis. It's my very first kiss, and it's better than anything I could have ever dreamed up.

It's like breathing or tasting sugar for the first time. It's breaking out and letting go.

It's freedom.

Roman scoops me into his arms, and I gasp as my legs wrap around him. He's so big and huge, and muscled that it's like holding on to a massive tree. But I cling to him, kissing him deeply.

He's so gorgeous, in a dark, scarred way. But I know those scars. With me, they're on the inside.

He keeps kissing me as he strides across the floor and pushes me onto the couch. I moan as he drapes me back across it and his hands find the front of my blouse.

I could stop him. Well, no, I couldn't. But I don't want to, either. I've been locked in a tower my whole life. And this man is breaking me out of it for the very first time.

His fingers twist as he kisses me, popping a button on my blouse. I whimper, and he reaches for a second. My pulse hammers in my chest and my ears as I open my mouth for him.

"I can't stop, Talia," he growls. "If you ask me to… I can try…"

"And if I don't?" I breathe, trembling against him as he opens another button.

"Don't, and well find out together."

I moan as my mouth sears to his again. His hands work open the rest of my buttons, practically tearing the last two off before he yanks the garment off of me. My bra follows quickly. I shiver, my nipples puckering as I find myself in this position for the first time.

I've never been like this—so naked, with a guy before. A *man*, like him. But when his eyes sweep down over me, all I can see is adoration in his eyes… like I'm a present he's barely been able to stop

himself from opening before Christmas. And now that he's seeing me, it's pure joy.

He groans as he leans down to kiss me softly.

"You're fucking beautiful, Talia," he growls thickly.

He pulls back, and suddenly reaches for his shirt. He peels it off his muscled, tattooed body, and my eyes bulge.

Holy *crap*. He's freaking gorgeous—like one of those Australian fire-fighters in those calendars they sell online. He's older, but he's in ridiculous shape—all pure muscle and brawn, covered in tattoos.

And it's so freaking hot. Heat throbs between my legs. My nipples harden to pink points as my core tightens with desire. Roman's mouth finds mine again, kissing me deeply before suddenly, I tense.

He frowns as he pulls back. But I blush and look away.

"I—I mean…"

His hand cups my cheek, and I raise my eyes to his.

"I've never done this before," I whisper. "*Any* of this."

His brow furrows. "If you don't want to—"

"No!" I blurt, blushing. "No, I mean… *yes*, I want to, I just… I don't know if…"

I groan.

"I don't want to disappoint you."

I gasp as his mouth sears to mine, slowly, and then more fiercely. Until I'm whispering into his lips.

"You could never disappoint me," he groans. "Ever."

He starts to move. He lowers his lips to my jaw, and then my neck. I gasp, running my hands over his gorgeous body and warm skin as he moves lower.

He looks up into my eyes as his lips trail down the slope of my tits, until they fasten around a nipple. I cry out, arching my back as he sucks. His hands slip down my rubs, running over my stomach and my hips before he finds the zipper to my skirt. He tugs it down, and I whimper as he starts to peel my skirt off.

When that's off, he pulls back and reaches for my panties. I bush, but I lift my ass for him. I throb with heat as he slips the thin lace down my legs, baring all of me to his eyes.

When he's plucked my panties from my feet, his hands slide slowly up my legs. He grips my thighs, making me tremble. Roman starts to pull, opening them, but I blush deeply as I squeeze them shut.

Roman just shakes his head. His grip tightens, and I gasp as I find myself letting him pull them open.

"No no, *solnyshka*," he groans. "This is for me. This is for *my eyes*, and my eyes only. No one else."

He leans into me, kissing me deeply and taking my breath away. Then he drops his mouth to my neck. Then down between my tits, moving to the left and then right to lick at my nipples as I squirm.

He kisses down my stomach, feeling it cave under his touch. His big hands skim up my thighs, pushing them wide apart as I moan for him—eagerly, desperately. Wanting this.

"This is all mine, *solnyshka*," he growls.

Suddenly, his mouth presses to me, covering my pussy, and my eyes roll back in pure ecstasy.

"*Oh my God…*"

His tongue drags wetly and slowly through my slit, making me gasp in pleasure. He bumps it over my throbbing clit, making me whimper eagerly.

His mouth bears down on me, humming into me as his tongue works magic over my clit. I've… touched myself, before. But it's always something that's taken forever to get anywhere.

With Roman, I'm rapidly approaching the point of no return, and he's barely just started to touch me with his tongue.

I cry out as he plunges that tongue into me. He drives it in and out, fucking me with his mouth before he slips higher. His lips wrap around my clit, and I whimper as a thick finger slips into my tight pussy. He rubs it in and out, pushing against a spot just inside that makes my toes curl. His tongue swirls circles over my clit, and suddenly, I can't hold back any longer.

I cry out, arching my back a I scream my release to the vaulted ceiling. I shudder, writhing and shamelessly pushing my hips to his mouth as I come so hard against him.

Roman groans, languidly licking me as I gasp for air. He slowly pulls back and then moves up my body. His lips press to mine, and I whimper as I kiss him back, eagerly. I can taste myself on him, but it seems to ignite me even hotter.

"*Shit…*"

He pulls away sharply. My brow furrow when I see the pain and worry on his face.

"Roman?"

“Talia, I…” he groans, and I realize how pale he is. His eyes start to roll back.

“Roman?!” I blurt, anxiously.

“*Oh fuck*…”

Suddenly, he goes white and tumbles to the side, slamming into the ground.

“*Roman*!”

I scream as I lunge off the sofa and slip my arms under him, cradling his head. That’s when I see the blood covering his back and seeping across the floor…

6

TALIA

His eyes blink, and my breath rushes out.

Thank God.

Thank *God* he's okay. I might not be anything close to being a doctor. But I do know my way around some basic first aid. Moving him was out of the question, seeing how big he is. But I was able to push him over to his side and get to the ugly gash on his back.

It's been fifteen minutes, and I've been slowly trying to get Gatorade down his throat as the bandages stop the bleeding.

Roman frowns, but his lips curl into a smile when he sees me.

"What happened?"

"You… you were wounded, somehow. Your back…" I frown. "It might have been from the gun fight outside. Maybe shrapnel, or maybe a bullet grazing you?"

He groans, chuckling darkly. "Fuck, I fainted, didn't I?"

I grin. "Just a little bit."

He grunts as he moves to sit.

"Hey, hang on, you should—"

"Nah, I'm okay."

He winces a little bit with the pain, but he seems to muscle through it until he's sitting up, looking me in the eye.

He smiles. "And you… you fixed me?"

I nod, chewing on my lip.

“You could have run.”

I swallow, holding his gaze.

“To what?”

He nods, smiling wryly. “Well, you still could have.”

“Maybe I don’t want to run, or ever go back to what I had before.”

He looks away, but then he turns back. Suddenly his hand his sliding into my hair and I moan as his lips find mine. Roman kisses me like our lives depend on it. It’s like a Hollywood type, passion-filled, toe-curling kiss. My mouth opens for his, and I whimper as his tongue teases mine.

“You should rest,” I breathe as he slowly pulls back.

“I can’t resist you,” he groans.

“I can’t resist you either.”

I moan as his mouth crushes to mine once again, stealing my breath away. But when he slowly pulls back again, he frowns as his eyes slip over me. I’ve slipped into a t-shirt and sleep shorts while he was resting. I look down and realize the mess on me.

“You’ve got blood on you,” he murmurs.

I shrug. “It’s fine.”

“Come.”

He stands, barely wincing as the pain. He turns, takes my hand, and pulls me after him as he heads down the hall.

“This is your room?”

I blush, groaning.

Yeah, it is. The whole pink, lacy, little-girl looking shebang. I wince with embarrassment at showing this place to a man, especially one like him.

But he just turns and smiles as he pulls me into him.

“I like your room,” he murmurs. “It feels cozy in here. Safe.”

“And pink,” I mumble.

He chuckles. “Pink suits you. Come.”

He tugs me into the room and then into the en suite bathroom. He walks over and starts to run the water in the huge claw-foot tub. He dumps bubble soap into it, and the whole thing fills with suds. He turns back to me, moving close. I whimper as he starts to peel my clothes off.

But I'm not embarrassed this time. I'm excited.

His hands skim over me, barely touching my skin. It's like he needs to keep himself from just grabbing me and having me any way he wants.

Instead, he gently helps me into the tub before he reaches for his pants. He pulls them off, then his boxers. My jaw *drops*

Holy. Shit.

My eyes bulge as I stare at Roman's *huge* cock—thick, veined, and hanging gorgeously between his thighs. He's not even… I blush. He's not even *erect*. Or, not very. But even still, his cock looks like it's halfway down his thigh.

I tremble with a lust and a hunger I've never felt before. A need I never knew I had. A desire I've never delved into.

He climbs in behind me and gently starts to wash me. I close my eyes, panting as his huge hands suds me up, teasing over every inch of my skin. Down my back, around my hips, up to slide over my aching nipples. Then down, brushing my pussy between my thighs.

He reaches for a cup on the side of the tub and slowly pours water over my head.

"Close your eyes, *solnyshka*," he murmurs. I do, throbbing with heat for him.

He gets my long hair soaking wet, and then I feel the shampoo ooze over my head. I grin.

He's washing my hair.

He does it slowly, lovingly; sudsing my hair from scalp to the ends. He gently rinses the shampoo from it, and then even reaches for the conditioner.

Holy crap, a girl could get used to this.

When he's done, he pulls me gently against his chest. I blush, tingling as I feel his big, muscled arms surround me. My ass presses back into his… *cock*. But this time, I can feel him thickening against me.

My body trembles with heat.

"You keep moving like that and I won't be able to hold back," he murmurs thickly.

I whimper. “From what?” I breathe.

His mouth brushes my ear.

“*From taking you*,” he growls.

I moan. “Maybe I don’t want you to hold back?”

“Careful, *solnyshka*,” he grunts. “Teasing is one thing. But I am weak with you.”

“So be weak.”

Suddenly, I gasp as his strong hands yank me around, spinning me until he crushes his mouth to mine. He grabs me, standing in the tub with me in his arms, lifting me effortlessly.

He steps from the tub, both of us dripping wet as he strides from the bathroom back into my bedroom.

Right for the bed.

7

ROMAN

MAYBE THIS IS WRONG. Maybe I have no right laying my hands on a girl as innocent and sweet as her. But there's no stopping this.

There's no stopping me from her.

She moans into my mouth, kissing me deeply as I lay her out on across the big, pink princess bed. I drag my mouth down her body, leaving suck marks down her neck and her collarbone. I suck one nipple into my mouth, resisting the way she's trying to drag me back up.

I want her squirming for me. I want her dripping fucking wet. She's never done this before. And I'm… large. Very, very large. I don't want to hurt her. But I *am* going to fill her with every inch of me.

I nibble across her chest to suck the other nipple into my mouth. Then I kiss down her soft tummy, loving the way she shivers under me. Her pussy is so fucking sweet, like candy. My mouth dips, and I groan as I drag my tongue through her silky lips.

"*Roman*…" she coos.

I suck on her clit, drooling spit down her already dripping wet pussy until she's glistening and quivering for me.

Now, she's ready.

I slide up and lower my mouth to hers. I kiss her deeply as her legs spread around my hips. I drag my swollen cock head over her pussy, and she shudders in pleasure. I groan, rubbing her clit with it, leaking precum all over her.

"*Oh my God*," she moans deeply.

"You ready for me, baby girl?" I growl. "Are you ready for me to slip my big cock into this sweet, tight little pussy?"

She whimpers and drags her nails over my hips.

"*Please*!" She begs.

I push my head down, and I hiss when I feel her petal lips open around my crown. My swollen head pushes into her, and she hisses. I can feel her tense, and I slow. But I don't stop. I roll my hips, sinking my thick dick into her. She starts to unclench, and I hear a moan of pure pleasure fall from her lips.

Inch by inch, my swollen cock pushes into her sweet little pussy. She's so fucking tight, and so slick and hot. I grit my teeth to hang on to my sanity as I drive deeper and deeper.

"Roman… Roman… *yes*…" she moans. "You're so big…"

"All for you, *solnyshka*."

She pauses and looks up into my eyes.

"You keep saying that…"

"It means sunshine," I whimper as I lower my lips to hers. "Because that's what you are to me. The first light I want to see in the morning, and the only warmth I want throughout my day."

She moans as her mouth crushes to mine. Her legs and arms wrap tight around me.

I'm done holding back.

With a thrust of my muscled hips, I sink the rest of my throbbing, aching hard cock into her hot little hole. Talia moans in ecstasy, and her hips rise to grind into me. Her eyes roll back as she clings to me.

I slide back out and then thrust back in as she moans loudly. I grunt, muscles clenching as I thrust again, making her ass ripple as I pound into her. I rise up and look down, watching in lust as my thickness—glistening with her sticky arousal—pumps into her tight little pink pussy. She's stretched so tight around me, but it's one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen.

I can't hold back. I thrust harder, deeper, rutting into her like an animal. She claws at my hips, rocking her hips into me harder as she moans and writhes beneath me. I can feel her walls clenching tighter and rippling around me.

My mouth crushes to hers again. Our bodies rock together harder and faster, until I know we're both going to explode.

"*Come for me*, *solnyshka*," I hiss. "Let me feel this pretty pussy come for me, now."

"Roman!"

She screams my name into my mouth as she wraps me so tight in her arms and legs. She moans as she starts to come, her pussy milking my cock as she shudders beneath me.

I'm lost in her.

I push as deep as I can as I let go. My balls throb, and my muscles clench. I moan her name as my cum spills deep into her little pussy, filling her over and over.

She's all mine. Forever.

"You're all mine," I groan into her mouth, echoing the decree in my head. "*All* mine."

8

ROMAN

It's dark out when I turn to let my eyes trace over her. Only the moon through the big, bullet-proof, blast-proof windows glistens like a silver stroke across her skin.

I grin, and my heart swells bigger than it's maybe ever been before. This is new. I've never once felt like this, about anyone. There've been women in my life… I mean, I'm forty, and I haven't lived the life of a monk.

But those women were barely blips on my radar. And now, I actually hate that they were in my past at all. Right now, looking at Talia, I wish I'd met her the way she'd met me: untouched, everything new.

But then, with her, all of this *is* new, even to me.

I keep watching her until my thoughts drift. Like it or not, there's a bigger picture here. A whole complicated picture outside these sealed windows.

Viktor is still out there. And this just made things much more complicated than they were ever supposed to become. I exhale slowly.

This got complicated. And now, I don't know where the exit here is, or how to get through it.

Something glows through the bathroom door. I frown, until I realize it's my phone. I slip from the bed and go grab it from where it's sitting on top of my pants from before. My jaw clenches when I pick it up.

It's Viktor calling me. But obviously, it's not Viktor. Just his phone.

"*What*," I growl knowing who I'm talking to before he chuckles.

"That how you as answer calls from a friend?" Gio snickers.

"You're no friend. Where is he?"

"He's here, he's here," Gio chuckles.

“Alive?” I hiss. My heart stops beating in the silence.

“Yeah, for now.”

My eyes narrow.

“You got balls coming after me like you did, Roman,” Gio hisses. “That is your name, right? Roman Savchenko, captain with Ivan’s little band of commies?”

My eyes narrow. “You understand that Russia hasn’t been a communist country for like thirty years, right?”

“Don’t lecture me, you little shit,” he snaps. “Ivan sent you to take me out, huh?”

I say nothing. He chuckles.

“Well, you fucked up, didn’t you?”

My eyes narrow in darkness of the bathroom. I hate even thinking this, let alone saying it. But I need him to fear me, so my friend doesn’t die.

“You forget who I have—”

“You have *not me*,” he snaps.

I bare my teeth. “She’s your *daughter*.”

There’s movement by the door. I look up to see Talia standing there, wrapped in a sheet, watching me. Her face says she knows who I’m taking to.

“My dad?” she whispers coldly.

My mouth thins as I cover the phone.

“Talia—”

“Put it on speaker.”

I shake my head. “No, angel…”

“Please?”

I shake my head. I won’t’ let her hear this shit from him. She’s been hurt enough.

“*Please*, Roman,” she pleads.

I hate that I am, but I do it. I tap the speaker button.

“You captured a pawn, not the fuckin’ king, you Russian dipshit,” Gio grunts. “Keep her.”

My heart clenches. Talia’s face goes ashen. I pull the phone away to hit the button to end the call, but she walks close and stops me.

“No,” she chokes. “I… I need to hear this.”

“What’s your move, asshole?” Gio goes on. “A trade? You think I don’t know who the fuck I have down here? I got ears, idiot. And I’m not blind. This is the future of the fuckin’ Kashenko Bratva right here. You know, the Italians… we used to run this town—”

“We can lament the glory days another time, Gio,” I growl.

He laughs. “You think I’ll trade her for *Viktor Komarov*? For this kinda leverage on Ivan?”

Talia hugs herself, and my heart starts to break even more for her.

“I think we’re done here.”

I end the call, drop the phone, and pull her into my arms. She doesn’t cry though. She just holds me tightly.

“I’m sorry, angel.”

“Don’t be,” she whispers. “I’ve always known it, I just…” she shakes her head.

“This should be a happier circumstance,” I growl. “For…”

She grins. “For you just having taken my virginity?”

I roll my eyes.

“Roman, are you blushing?” She giggles.

“*No*.”

She grins. “You are I think that’s supposed to be *my* job right now.”

I smile as I sit on the edge of the tub and pull her into my lap.

“Your job is to stay with *me*,” I growl.

“My dad though…” her brow worried. “He has your friend?”

I nod, and she looks away.

“You have to make the trade.”

My face tightens. “It’s more complex than that.”

“Because of me…”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation. “Because there’s no way I’m letting you go, or have anything to do with Chris fucking Amato—”

But suddenly, I freeze. There’s been a piece of this puzzle floating in my head, and I think it may have just clicked into place.

“The Amato family…”

She groans. “*Ugh*, Roman…”

“The deal was put on pause today, wasn’t it? I mean your marriage deal, for your father’s business arrangements with them?”

She nods glumly. “Yeah, for now. But it’s a matter of time before they—”

“Alfredo Amato was arrested this morning on Federal charges.”

My heart surges as the dots connect. I want to hit myself for not seeing it earlier. In the adrenaline rush of everything that’s happened tonight, I’ve forgotten seeing that on the news this morning, sitting next to Viktor as we went over our hit for tonight.

“The deal with the Amato family is on pause because Alfredo just got nabbed by the fucking feds,” I growl. My eyes practically glow with excitement at what this means.

Talia turns her head to stare at me. “Wait, he *was*?”

“He was,” I hiss. “And your father has a correspondence with him.”

Her eyes go wide. Suddenly, we’re both up and bolting through the penthouse together, towards Gio’s office. The laptop is still open and unlocked, and I click back to the email correspondence.

I grin widely.

Fuck yes.

“What are we looking—”

“Alfredo Amato was arrested at seven-thirty this morning.”

She frowns. “And?”

I grin as I point a finger at the time's that some of the later emails were sent back and forth: nine in the morning. Nine-fifteen. Nine-thirty-seven. Ten-Fourteen. And it goes on like that for most of the morning and afternoon.

"Holy shit…" Talia breathes as she grasps what I've found.

"These were sent *after* his arrest?"

I nod.

"What does this mean?"

"Aside from Alfredo having access to a phone or laptop in jail, which isn't that surprising given his power?" I smile thinly. "He was arrested, publicly, this morning, on *federal* conspiracy and racketeering charges. Meaning whoever emailed with him after that was made public, about *more* conspiracy and racketeering type shit?"

My grin widens.

"It's now conspiracy with someone of criminal interest to the US Government."

I turn to her.

"It's evidence to bring down your father."

She stares back at me, her eyes wide, but with the hint of smile on her lips. But slowly, her brow furrows.

"But if you release it, he…"

"Yeah."

I look away. If I release this, Gio will kill Viktor before the feds even get near him.

"What if…" she bites her lip. "What if *I* went out to him, and tried to broker some sort of—"

"Your father is an asshole. But he still knows, or thinks," I grin, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "That you're the leverage. If you go out there…"

"Your friend is in trouble."

I nod.

"Same outcome. Yeah."

She frowns, pulling close to me and pressing her face to my bare chest.

“I wish this was easy,” she whispers. “I wish we could just walk away from all of this.”

“Me too.”

My arms wrap around her as I pull her tight.

“Me too.”

***

It’s late, and she’s had a long, long day and night. It’s not long before we’re back in bed, with her sleeping soundly next to me. But regretfully, I slip from the bed and grab my phone again. I call Viktor’s number.

“Well, well, well—”

“Let me talk to him,” I snap at Gio. “Viktor.”

“You got a lot of nerve tossing orders at—”

“Put him on the phone or I start shooting,” I lie.

There’s silence. And then a familiar voice grunts into the phone.

“How’s the penthouse?”

I chuckle. “How are *you*?”

“I’ve got an extra hole in me I would rather not have.”

“You okay, though? Hanging in there?”

“I’m…” he trails off. “Yeah.”

“Viktor—”

“I’m fine for now. Tomorrow is…” he grunts. “I’m pretty weak, Roman. I’m losing a lot of blood.

Fuck.

“Look, I’m up here with—”

“I know who you’ve got. How’s that going?”

I grin. And it’s like Viktor can *hear* me smiling.

He starts to chuckle. “You sneaky motherfucker. I’m down here bleeding out and you’re up there banging—”

“It’s *not* like that,” I snap, viciously.

He stops laughing. “Well… this is interesting.”

“I didn’t mean for this to… for any of this…”

I sigh, my eyes closing tightly.

“The Bratva has my first loyalty, Vik. You know that. So—”

“So nothing. If you think you’re going to trade Gio’s daughter for me, you’re fucking out of your mind.”

I grit my teeth. “Viktor, you’re the future of this—”

“Stop. C’mon, even I can tell you’d never actually make that trade. And I don’t want you to.”

He sighs.

“You’re into this girl, aren’t you? Like a real thing.”

I close my eyes. “Take that off the table. This is about making sure you’re—”

“Guess this *is* more complicated, huh.”

“It got… yeah…”

He chuckles. “You deserve happiness, Roman. You know that, right?”

I shrug. “Viktor—”

“Because I don’t think you *do* know that. You punish yourself for everyone you’ve ever known who didn’t make it. Every time something bad happens, you shoulder it.”

“When I *should* shoulder—”

“You shouldn’t.” he sighs deeply. “Let the past go. Be happy, Roman. And if she makes you happy? Like really happy? Then leave me out of the equation.”

“Can’t do that,” I growl.

“You can, and you will.”

“You’re not my boss, Viktor.”

He grunts. “I will be.”

“Not if you bleed out.”

“Shit,” he mutters. “They’re coming back for the phone. Roman, don’t—”

“Times up,” Gio snarls. “You have an hour to open up my fucking penthouse and get your ass out of it. Or I shoot your friend and end this slow bleed.”

He hangs up abruptly.

I’m seething, but so fucking tired—exhausted, really—as I slip back to bed and slide next to a sleeping Talia.

I grit my teeth, frowning as I try and find the answer here. I just gotta think. I gotta find the solution here. Sleep is dragging at me, but I fight it. I hold off, because I have to find the answer. I need to…

To…

The adrenaline runs out. And I *crash*.

9

TALIA

He's still sleeping when my eyes open. It's dark, though, and the clock on the side table says four-thirty in the morning.

I turn to look at Roman, and I smile. He's so rough and beautiful. And being here in this bed with him is something I could do forever.

But I know what I have to do.

In a sense, he's saved me. He's shown me color in a black and white world. I can't let him die, and I can't let his friend die.

Slowly, I slip out of bed. I dress in jeans and hoodie, and as quietly as I can I pad into the main entranceway by the staircase. There's a code that *only* unlocks the elevator, not the full lockdown. I tap that in and slip into the elevator when it opens.

I key in the code to re-lock the door, and the I start to drop down to the ground level. My heart is thudding so loud it's almost deafening. But I know I have to do this.

The elevator opens, and I gasp as ten men with guns whirl to level them at me. But when they realize who I am, the guns lower, and the whispering starts. Suddenly, my dad is pushing his way through to stare at me.

"*Talia*?!"

He looks shocked to see me. He almost looks *annoyed*, too. But he hides it.

"You're free! My girl!"

He rushes over to give me a pretty lackluster hug.

"Hi dad," I smile a fake smile as I briefly hug him back. But inside, I feel rage. The curtain has dropped on this whole charade between him and I. I've always known I as pawn to him. But hearing

it? Well, that's a step beyond.

"So, he just let you go?!"

"He's passed out."

My dad grins and whirls to his men. "Get up there! Go get his ass—"

"Wait," I shake my head. "The friend of his… he was part of this plot to kill you? To destroy this family?"

I deserve an Oscar for this.

My dad smiles at my pretend wrath and fury.

"Yeah, he is, Talia. But we'll string both these fuckers up—"

"I couldn't help with the marriage," I say tensely. "I want to help the family, dad. Let me take care of him. The friend."

His brows arch.

"Hang on, Talia."

"Let me kill him."

He balks, but then his smile widens.

"*Wow*," he chuckles, turning to his men. "We got a hard-baller here!"

They all laugh with him.

"Shit, Talia! A real chip off your old man's block, huh?" He frowns. "You're serious about this?"

"Let me do this," I hiss.

"You're not gonna shoot—"

"Yes, I am."

He eyes me curiously. But then, he grins.

"That's my girl," he chuckles darkly. He turns to one of his guys.

"Give her your piece and go with her to the trailer to make sure it goes okay."

He turns back to me. "You're sure?"

“I’ve never been surer of anything,” I smile. And it’s true.

My dad laughs. “Alright. Go make him bleed, Talia. We’re going to go kill this motherfucker upstairs.”

No, he’s not. They don’t know that I’ve re-locked the door at the top of the elevator. They can get up there, but they’ll never get in without a welding torch and about five hours.

The henchman he’s pointed to nods and walks with me to the foreman trailer to the side of the construction site. When we get to the door, I stop and turn to him.

“Gun?”

He frowns.

“Can’t shoot him without a gun, can I?” I snap.

He nods, and sheepishly hands it to me.

“Thanks. Stay out here—”

“Your father —”

“Stay out here,” I snap, my voice full of an authority and a confidence I never had before. A power I never realized.

The guy nods. “Yeah, uh, of course Ms. Marchetti.”

I step into the trailer, turn, and click the lock to the door. When I turn around, my eyes fall on a guy tied to a chair looking, well, awful.

I slowly drink him in. He’s tall and built. Handsome, in a rough way like Roman. But also a bit younger than Roman.

For some reason, my mind drifts to my friend Fiona. But I roll my eyes and shove that away. Please. My uptight, book-nerd friend with a tattooed Bratva killer?

But then I blush. The same “it would never happen” could have easily been said about Roman and I less than twenty-four hours ago…

The man—Viktor—looks up at me, and then drops his gaze to the gun. He cocks a brow.

“You’re the executioner?”

“I’m Talia.”

His eyes snap to mine in recognition.

“Interesting play for Roman…” he growls.

“Not Roman’s play.”

I walk towards him as his jaw clenches. Behind him, I start to yank open the ropes binding him.

“You know what you’re doing, Talia Marchetti?” he grunts.

“Yeah, I’m saving Roman the only way I can.”

He grins, groaning as I help him stand.

“I think I’m going to like you,” he chuckles with a grunt of pain.

I grin and hand him the gun.

“I assume you know how to use this?”

“That’s a fair assumption.”

“Good because I don’t even know where the safety is.”

He grins. But suddenly we hear voices outside—the sound of guys checking guns and my dad barking orders.

“They’re going up?”

I nod. “The door is locked, though.”

“Your dad has construction dynamite. Would that get through that door?”

I tense. “I… I have no idea,” I tremble.

Viktor’s face darkens. “Then we’d better move.”

We go to the door of trailer. With a nod from Viktor, I slowly open it and step out. The guard turns with frown.

“Weird, I didn’t hear a gun—”

Viktor might be half dead and bleeding. But he’s still clearly a powerful man. His arm snakes around the guard’s neck, choking him out before he drops to the ground.

“Shit!” I groan, glancing at my phone. “My phone’s dead. But if we can find another one, I can call—”

“No time.” Viktor turns, scanning the construction site until his eyes land on the huge crane standing tall, all the way up above the penthouse floor.

He smiles thinly and turns back to me. “Since you’re doing all this for Roman… no offense, but I can assume you’re a little crazy?”

I frown curiously.

“Maybe?”

“Good. Let’s go find out how crazy you are, Talia.”

10

ROMAN

I WAKE up to banging sounds; big, loud, booming thuds. And they're coming from the entryway to the penthouse, where the elevator is.

Shit.

I whirl to Talia, but my heart clenches when I realize she's not in bed.

"Talia!"

I roar her name, lunging up and yanking my jeans on. I rush through the penthouse yelling her name before I realize the horrible truth.

She's gone.

I hear the sound of my phone back in the bedroom though. I bolt back in there and yank it up as I see Viktor's number calling.

"Gio, you son of a—"

"It's me!!" She screams. My heart soars, relief flooding though me.

"Jesus, Talia," I groan. "Where the hell—"

"Go to the terrace, *now*!"

I don't need to be told twice that shit is going down. I move, fast. I rush though the penthouse again, out the sliding glass doors onto the huge outdoor garden terrace. I glance up at the lock-down security bars covering it, like a cage.

"What now, princess?"

"There's a control keypad on the wall. Punch in seven-seven-nine-two-three-zero-zero-eight. It'll undo the lockdown on the penthouse."

I tense. “That’ll open the door I assume your dad is trying to bang down now?”

“Yeah,” she blurts. “But the bars over the terrace, too.”

I frown. “And then?”

But suddenly, something catches my eye—movement in the semi-dimness of the early dawn. I turn, and my eyes narrow. A construction crane is moving—twisting to swing the arm of it right across towards the edge of the terrace.

I’m about to wonder why the hell they’re starting construction with all of this shit going down. When suddenly, my jaw drops.

Oh shit.

The man in the control box is *Viktor*, and Talia is right next to him, staring at me grimly.

“You’re shitting me,” I growl into the phone.

“Hope you’re not scared of heights,” Talia says thinly. “Okay, punch in the code.”

I tense. “One sec.”

I bolt back into the penthouse and run to Gio’s office. I’m not leaving without the laptop. I stick a book in it to keep it not quite closed, stuff it in a backpack next to his desk, and then rush back to the terrace.

“Alright, I’m doing it.”

Here goes nothing.

I turn and punch in the code. Instantly, there’s a mechanical clicking sound as the bars begin to slide back. But I also hear the sound of the elevator door opening, and men yelling as they charge in.

Gio and his guys are inside.

The windows next to me suddenly ping with bullets. The glass is bulletproof, but they’ll be here in seconds.

Time to do this.

I whirl, I run, and I vault the edge of the rooftop terrace as Viktor swings the crane past. For a second, it’s just dead air—the feeling of imminent death as I fling myself across a forty-story drop. But then my hands grip the edge of the crane arm, and my heart jolts.

The crane starts to pull away from the roof just as Gio and his guys spill onto the terrace. Bullets wiz past me as I climb up onto the walkway of the crane arm. Suddenly, hands are grabbing me, helping me up. And when I clamor on, she's right there.

"*Roman*!"

She throws her arms around me, hugging me tightly.

"We need to move!"

"Hey!" Viktor calls from the control box. The crane arm is still swinging, and I follow his pointed finger to the roof of the opposite building.

"Hang the fuck on!" He roars.

I grab Talia. I grab the crane, and I brace like hell. The arm smashes into the terrace of the other building. Metal wrenches and whines, and brick and mortar explode in chunks to fall to the ground below.

The crane shudders to a stop, and all three of us bolt for the wrecked roof of the building we've just smashed into. Viktor is on his phone, barking orders, like the general he is.

But me?

I don't need to lead, or to control or wield power. I just need her.

We're shielded over here—the crane blocking any shot Gio and his men might have. I pull Talia into my arms, and I kiss her deeply as I inhale the scent of her.

"I barely know you," she giggles.

I grin. "I barely know you, too. But I know you enough to know I'm in love with you."

Her eyes go wide, and a blush creeps over her cheeks. Her lips curl, and suddenly, she's laughing as she throws her arms around my neck.

"I love you too," she murmurs as her lips find mine.

We're still there, kissing, when the Kashenko helicopter drops out of the sky to land on the roof. Lev, another *avtoritet*, jumps out and eyes Viktor.

"You look like shit," he grins.

"So, you, on a good day," Vik wheezes as our friend helps him into the chopper. He turns to us, arching a brow and smirking.

“You’re coming too, I assume?” he says to Talia.

“She’s coming too,” I growl.

“Well get in, we’re out of here.”

Talia giggles as I sweep her into my arms. I kiss her deeply, passionately, with all the love in my heart. Then we’re on the chopper and pulling away into the dawn.

EPILOGUE

TALIA

Four months later:

THE LAPTOP in my dad's office was the silver bullet. It had everything on it, and ultimately, *that's* what he wanted when Roman barricaded us in the penthouse.

Not me. But I've made peace with that.

The information about my dad's criminal organization on the laptop put him away. But I'm not crying. Not just because he was willing to trade me for business, but because of how bad he'd gotten. There's crime, and then there's *heinous* crime. And my dad's human trafficking operations involving poor girls was way over the line.

But that's the past, now. Now, I have Roman, and a new life with him. Viktor healed and is now the newly appointed head of the Kashenko Bratva, now that Ivan has stepped down.

Today, though, is about us—Roman and I. And we're celebrating two milestones. One is his retirement from the Bratva, with Viktor's blessing.

The other, is our wedding.

Today is the start of our new life together. And we're leaving Chicago, too. We have no idea where we're going, but also, it doesn't matter. We'll go where we take each other. The west coast maybe. Or maybe Hawaii to spend our days surfing and holding each other on the beach.

We've got money—some from a trust that was given to me after my dad's trial. And some from the small fortune Roman's amassed over the years working for the Kashenko family. So we have money, and no more shadows chasing either of us.

From here on out, I think it might just be sand, the crash of the surf, and his big arms around me.

"And do you—"

“I do,” Roman grunts hurriedly at the priest’s question, grinning at me.

“I do too,” I blurt, barely containing my excitement.

Roman clears his throat. “So, if we could just get to the part where—”

“Oh go ahead and kiss the bride,” the older priest chuckles.

I jump into Roman’s arms. My lips find his, and I never want to pull them away.

Because after a life locked in a tower, I’ve finally found my happy ever after.

The End.

PAYING THE BRATVA'S DEBT PREVIEW

Looking to dive deeper into the Kashenko and Volkov Bratvas? Viktor, Yuri, Maksim, Lev and more mentioned in *Brutal King* already have their own books!

The Bratva's Claim series is written to be read and enjoyed in any order, as standalones. However, you may find that reading them in the order below offers the best over-all story-arc experience.

Paying The Bratva's Debt
The Bratva's Stolen Bride
Hunted By The Bratva Beast
His Captive Bratva Princess
Owned By The Bratva King
The Bratva's Locked Up Love

Read on for a sneak peek of *Paying The Bratva's Debt.*

Chapter 1

Fiona

"Don't you have a sewer to crawl back into, Chet?"

Zoey suddenly shoves her way between me and the creep hitting on me, glaring at him.

"Zoey Stone," he growls, frowning.

"She's not interested. Fly away, scumbag."

"Why don't you let her speak for—"

"Trust me, she's not interested. You're not her type, Chet."

He glares at her, and then turns to me. "Why don't we let Fiona tell us what her type is?"

"Because I already know it's *not* the type who like his girls young, rich, and *unconscious*," she hisses.

He bristles, snarling at her. "Listen to me, you little—"

"Fuck off, Chet. Now."

"*Bitch*," he mutters. He glares at Zoey before he turns and slinks away.

"Ugh, fuck that guy," she groans.

"My dad sent him over."

"Well, your dad has really terrible taste in men for you."

I sigh. "He checked all the boxes—rich, successful, and apparently a…" I frown into my friend's face. "Wait, did you and—"

"Oh my God, *no*. Not me," she makes a face. "Crystal Shoenburg used to date his brother though. *Lots* of family donations to sweep his predatory bullshit under the rug."

I blanche. "Wait, that was Chet Brubaker?"

"*Yep*."

I groan. "As in…"

"Son of Melvin Brubaker, CEO of Adonis Capital. That's the one."

I roll my eyes and turn to glare at my father across the fundraising party. He's not even looking though. "Glad to see we've evolved past arranged marriages for political means," I grumble.

“I mean, does it actually surprise you? How many guys has your dad tried to set you up with because of their family’s money or political connections?”

“More than I want to count.”

She sighs. “So, you’re going to tell him today?”

“That’s the plan.’

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Zoey.”

The plan is to finally tell my father I’m leaving my gilded cage. I mean I’m twenty-two, I have a law degree, and it’s ridiculous that I’m still living under his roof as basically a captive doll. So, I’m leaving. Even if it means getting cut off completely, I have to get out.

And today, I’m telling him that. No more suitors pushed on me. No more being a pawn for his political career. I want my life, and I want it now.

I arch as my father shakes some hands. Wilson, his chief of staff, comes up and whispers something in his ear. My father frowns and nods quickly, then he turns and makes a beeline for his office down the hall.

“Where’s he off to?”

“Oh, probably has Satan on the phone, offering my first-born child in exchange for a State Senate seat.”

Zoey snickers. “Well, no one’s allowed in his office, right?”

“True.”

“So, wouldn’t now be an opportune time?”

I bite my lip. She’s right. He’ll be alone and cornered. If I’m going to do this, it might as well be now. I turn and pass her my glass.

“I’ll be back.”

“Be brave!”

“Thanks.”

I slink away through the crowd. No one tries to congratulate me or stop me, not without my father watching. And that’s fine with me. I slip down the hall until I’m right outside his office door. I go to

open it, but suddenly I hear voices arguing inside.

"Look, I already told you," my father is saying sharply. "I can get you money now, or if you want to wait until after the election, whatever contracts you want are—"

"I am not interested in gambling on your political aspirations, Thomas."

I freeze. The other man's voice is dark and gritty, with some sort of Russian or other Balkan accent.

My dad laughs nervously. "Gambling? Please. This is a sure thing. And trust me, once I'm in, those contracts are going to be so sweet, you'll get cavities—"

"I already told you, I am not interested," the man with the smokey, dark, powerful voice sighs heavily. "We had an arrangement, Thomas."

"I know, I know, and I'm trying—"

"I did you a favor."

"I know that! And I'm so appreciative, I just—"

"A debt is owed," the voice snarls quietly. "And today, I am here to collect."

"Look, I'm trying, okay?! If you just give me a month, Mr. Komarov."

I freeze, dread filling me. The behind-door crooked dealings with my father, the Russian accent, and now, a name I've seen in newspapers. The man my father is speaking to is the single most dangerous, violent, and notorious man in organized crime in Chicago. Perhaps even the whole country.

He's talking to Viktor Komarov, the vicious, powerful head of the Kashenko Bratva.

"I'm not interested in giving you a goddamn thing, Thomas," the Russian mobster hisses. "Except a further three seconds to tell me how I'm going to get my money, today. One."

"Mr. Komarov, please! This is not how things are done—"

"Do *not* lecture me, Thomas. We had an arrangement. That is how things are done. Two."

"Mr. Komarov!"

I hear the sudden metallic click of a gun on the other side of the door. I gasp loudly.

Too loudly.

The barking sound of a snarled command in Russian echoes through the door. Footsteps cross the room, and I gasp as I pull away from the door. But it's too late. The office door yanks open, and two

burly, terrifying men suddenly grab me. I scream, and my father is yelling, but they ignore us both. They yank me inside and throw me to the ground. The two of them storm over to me, when suddenly, there's a barked command.

"*Ostanovka!*"

The deep, gravelly voice booms through the room.

I feel my heart pounding in my throat as I slowly look up. The two burly men move aside, and suddenly, I'm looking at a tall, broad-shouldered, completely gorgeous tank of a man. He's even taller and bigger than his two bodyguards, and you can almost see the power rippling off of him. His deep blue eyes look right at me, captivating my gaze.

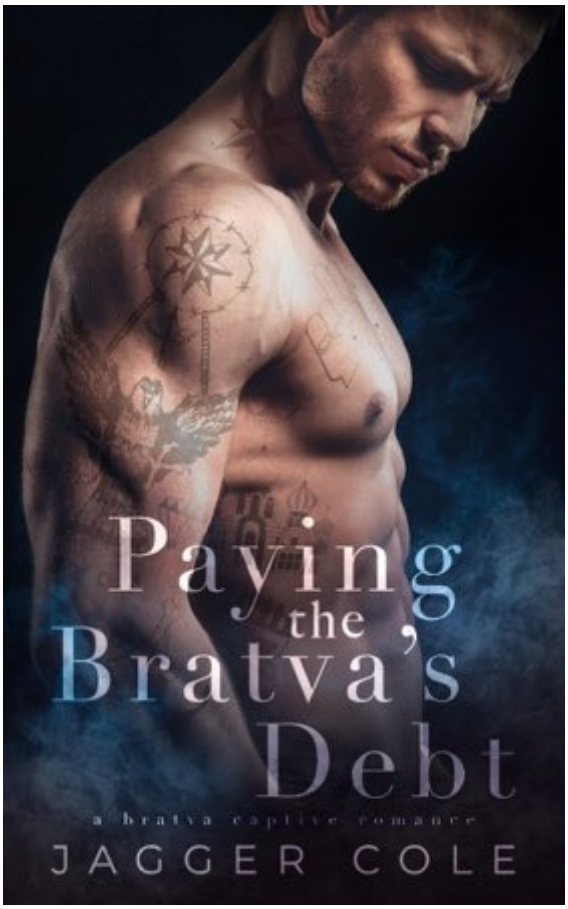
"Who are you?"

"Mr. Komarov," my father fumbles, almost tripping over himself as he stutters over. "This is Fiona, my daughter."

The brooding Russian's eyes glimmer. They narrow at me as a shadow of a smile curls at his lips.

"Thomas," he growls. "Our debt is settled."

Keep reading!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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